SHALL WE BROADEN OUR PROGRAM OF MASONIC EDUCATION TO REACH A RANK AND FILE OF THE CRAFT?

By HERBERT HUNGERFORD

WE know what the "wise boys" among our brethren will say to this proposition. Not long ago I had a talk with one of them, a newly elected young Master, about this matter. Quote he

> "You are all wet, old man, and wasting your time trying to interest the average Mason in anything about education. It simply can't be- done, because nine men out of ten join a lodge for the fun and fellowship they expect to get out of it. They may be dumb, but they know what they want and what they don 't want, also. They simply will not stand for anything labeled educational. Even studying their part in the ritual is too much of a tax upon the minds of many candidates. Try to put more educational features in your lodge programs and you will drive most of your members to the movies or other places of amusement. Give them lots of lively and light entertainments and plenty of good feeds and you'll get them out; but try to get the average Mason interested in anything educational and you'll see what will happen to the attendance at your lodge meetings. As everybody knows, when there is a good feed at Third Degrees, the attendance will be doubled or trebled over ordinary meetings."

This sounds fairly plausible. Apparently it represents a common viewpoint, judging from the lack of anything of an educational nature in most lodges. The indifference which most of our brethren display towards every effort to encourage the discussion of any educational question - such as the one we are now discussing, for example - tends to confirm the view that education is a dead issue in Freemasonry.

Do Our Present Programs Hold Over Members?

It may seem presumptions, therefore, for anyone to challenge this viewpoint or question the correctness of this opinion. Yet this is exactly what I venture to do, and I am basing my criticism of this commonly accepted notion upon the plain question: Are our grand balls and banquets, our smokers and beef-steak dinners, our official pow-wows and our routine ceremonials really attracting the interests and maintaining the attendance of the majority of our membership?

All available statistics indicate a distinctly negative answer to this question. In fact, the most optimistic data show that not more than twenty percent of the Freemasons throughout our country are regular attendants at lodge meetings or take any active part in Masonic affairs. If this condition upholds the viewpoint that almost exclusive emphasis should be placed upon the social and entertaining features of Freemasonry in which most lodges have indulged in recent years, I must be vastly mistaken. I am aware, of course, that other reasons may be assigned to account for the proportionately small attendance at lodge meetings, as for instance, the claim that many men simply take the Blue Lodge Degrees in order to make their way into some of the various auxiliary orders. But, it appears to me quite logical to place the burden of proof upon those who claim that our present-day programs are exactly suited to the temperament of our times.

WHY MEN BECOME MASONS.

Every candidate coming into Masonry avows that his principle purpose in seeking admission into a lodge is to learn self-control and self-improvement. Surely this is the plain and clearly stated meaning of the candidate's answer to one of the first questions asked during his initiation.

Possibly one explanation of the distressing fact that over eighty per cent of those initiated into our lodges so soon discontinue regular attendance or active participation in lodge affairs, may be the failure of their lodge to provide anything in its program that the average man might regard as an aid to self-control or a means of self-improvement.

The monotonous routine of our degree mills, the dry-as-dust dullness of our big back-patting official affairs, and the standardized socials of the average lodge program evidently are not sufficient to satisfy the cultural aspirations of some of the eighty percent of our membership who drop out of Masonic activity about as soon as they "get their degrees. "

No pretense is made that the cultural aspirations of most of us are very lofty. Yet, I believe, that we do possess some desire to subdue our baser passions and improve ourselves as much as possible without taking too much time or trouble about it. Few of us are dominated by any all consuming desire for self-culture. We are seeking the pleasant paths and broad roads to knowledge. Most of us are unwilling to make any serious sacrifice to acquire information or improvement. We prefer, as far as possible, to take our educational lessons in small doses, carefully sugar coated.

After admitting this, you have not eliminated the fact that the average man is an aspiring being. In various ways, feeble though they may be, he is always trying to improve. Among those who seek admission into Freemasonry, I am convinced, this universal desire for self improvement is above the average.

Personally, I cherish no illusions that elaborate or studious educational programs are likely to become popular in our lodges. Frankly, I confess that it would be difficult for me to become keenly interested in highly intellectual activities or in the Culture that is always spelled with a capital C.

On the other hand, although my own observation and experience in the field of Masonic Education has been limited, it has been sufficient to convince me that the vast majority of our members are chiefly interested in the educational aims, which originally were the dominant features of all activities of our ancient brethren. I contend that modern Masonry has made the mistake of swinging too far away from the ancient educational ideals in catering too much to the pleasure-seeking tendencies of the present day.

There seems to be plenty of evidence of a fairly general feeling among the Craft that everything is not altogether satisfactory in our programs now-a-days. But modern Masonic activities are so diversified and so complex that it would be impossible, it seems to me, to devise a limited or particular plan for Masonic Education that will meet the needs and requirements of so many and varied types of lodges. To confine a program for Masonic Education to Study Clubs or Lecture Courses means restricting our educational activities to a proportionately small percentage of our membership.

The response or reaction to my own efforts on behalf of Masonic Education has thoroughly sold me on the necessity of attempting broader and more diversified programs than we have been generally advocating heretofore. In brief, my personal answer to the question we have propounded is unqualifiedly in the affirmative.

SHOULD MASONIC EDUCATION BE DEMOCRATIC ?

I am very little disturbed over the fear expressed by some of our brethren that to further broaden our program of educational activities would mean spreading out our efforts so thinly that the results would be hardly deserving of the term educational. Possibly, I may be too deeply concerned about reaching the rank and file and interesting them in at least a few elementary educational activities. Likewise, it may be that my personal temperament is at fault in the matter of the slight interest that I take in Masonic Research or Education as an intellectual pastime to be indulged in chiefly by the Cultured Minority who classify themselves as the Intelligensia of the Craft. If my attitude toward Masonry is thoroughly Democratic, it seems to me that the institution itself contains ample authority for such an attitude. If the main principles we profess as Masons are not thoroughly in accord with Democratic ideals, then I have misconstrued the meaning of our ritual.

The only way to give a definite understanding of exactly what I have in mind in proposing that we broaden our program of Masonic Education, is for me to outline a number of the principle activities which I would classify as educational and which, I believe, might be attempted, in some measure at least by every type of Masonic lodge.

I do not mean to suggest, of course, that any lodge should attempt the entire program proposed, but that each lodge should select and carry out some of the suggested activities, adapting them to the particular requirements of the lodge.

AN EDUCATIONAL COMMITTEE IN EVERY LODGE.

First and foremost, I would advocate the appointment of an educational committee in every lodge. It seems to me entirely reasonable that along with the social, entertainment, financial and other standing committees of every duly organized and well regulated lodge, there certainly should be an educational committee whose particular duties would consist in doing everything possible and practical in the furtherance of the cause of Masonic Education among the members of the lodge.

In fact, I think the first step toward the definite introduction of Masonic Education into any lodge, invariably, should be the appointment by the Master of a Committee on Masonic Education.

The second important effort that I believe all those interested in the cause of Masonic Education should put forth is to urge and encourage Masonic speakers everywhere to devote more attention to this cause. It seems to me that many of the topics discussed by Masonic speakers are trivial as compared to the question of the whys and wherefores of Masonic Education.

Please bear in mind that I am not advocating any dry-as-dust discussions or-lectures of the purely academic side of education. Rather, I am urging that Masonic Education should always be considered from the practical standpoint of showing how the great teachings of our ancient Fraternity should be adapted and applied to the solution of the modern problems, with which all men and Masons are

necessarily concerned. Let it be said, too, that the first effort of every Masonic speaker should be devoted to the verification of his facts. Too many speakers are careless in this regard and consequently depart unconsciously from the truth.

A third effort that should be encouraged in every possible way is to interest more of our members in reading books on Masonic subjects. We should do everything possible to provide easy, inexpensive ways for distributing and circulating literature among our brethren. It seems to me that it might be a good thing to adopt and uphold the slogan-" A Library in every Lodge."

Societies committed to the cause of Masonic Education, such as the National Masonic Research Society? it seems to me, should provide suggestions and material-for broad gauge educational programs to meet the varied requirements of every type of lodge and to appeal to the interests of all classes in the Craft. Instead of devoting our attention mainly to the interests of Masonic scholars, I believe, we should also spare no pains or efforts to discover and devise the ways and means of appealing to the educational interests of all Freemasons from the highest to the lowest in aspirations and attainments.

READING COURSES AND KEYBOOKS.

Another activity that should be undertaken, in my opinion, is the publication of what might be termed keybooks or primers on various Masonic topics, the idea of each keybook being to open up the doors to a wider interest in and knowledge of the subject treated upon. These brief booklets, outlining the elementary principles of various Masonic subjects, should be published inexpensively and sold at low prices to all Masons who may be induced to purchase and read them. Personally, I am not greatly in favor of publishing booklets for free distribution because it is my impression that most folks regard anything that costs them nothing as being worth exactly what it costs.

As a means of encouraging more widespread reading of Masonic books, periodicals, and keybooks, I believe, a variety of reading courses could be outlined covering all phases of Masonic Education. These reading courses should not be elaborate or expensive but simply suggestive plans whereby an ordinary Mason could derive the most benefit from reading a few books on any Masonic subject in which he might become interested.

I believe that there are thousands of our members who have the ability as well as the desire to speak on behalf of the cause of Masonic Education but do not know exactly how to go about preparing a brief and interesting talk on this topic. I would recommend, therefore, that topical outlines and material for short addresses on various subjects connected with Masonic Eduction, should be provided at a nominal cost for all speakers requesting such assistance.

A NATIONAL MASONIC LECTURE SERVICE

In addition to providing material for such brief addresses, a major effort on behalf of Masonic Education should be to encourage the planning and conducting of Lecture courses covering all phases of this subject. There ought to be, in my opinion, not only a way of rendering assistance to those who desire to conduct a lecture course to local-talent speakers, that is the members of the lodges of a particular community, but there also should be some sort of a clearing house or national lecture bureau in which the outstanding student and lecturers on Masonic Education could be brought into touch with

interested audiences. In other words, this national Masonic lecture bureau should, of course, work both ways; that is, it should supply the requests of those who are conducting Masonic Educational lecture courses and wish to obtain the services of speakers of outstanding talent outside of their own community. Likewise, the bureau in due course of time should be able to develop a wider field or forum for Masonic speakers of unusual talent.

That any program for Masonic Education, either narrow or broad, should provide plans and programs for round table discussion groups, almost goes without saying. These topics for discussion should cover the widest possible range and should, of course, appeal chiefly to the interests of ordinary Masons.

In addition to these introductory, elementary, or kindergarten courses of study, there should be study outlines, lesson questions, and text books for all grades of Masonic Study Clubs.

It will be noted that little attempt has been made in the foregoing to elaborate the various suggestions as to the channels of interest or the methods of Masonic study that have been recommended. Neither is it professed that these suggestions are complete or comprehensive. Doubtless, many other avenues for Masonic Education will be opened up and many other methods will be devised, providing the general policy of a broad gauge program should meet with approval among our readers. Our attempt has been to suggest a fairly wide variety of Masonic activities which, we feel, should be justly classed as educational, with the aim of enabling our readers to compare the respective advantages of this broader program with the present policy of confining the scope of Masonic educational work to a lore limited, yet more definitely instructive class of activities.

I have endeavored to present my views which, of course, are entirely in favor of the broader program. But I do not profess the authority to speak for the Craft at large or for any others excepting a scattering number of brethren throughout the country who have written to me expressing their approval of other articles in which I have advocated a somewhat similar policy. Consequently, we are anxious to have every Mason interested in this question present his views and offer criticism of this proposition regardless of whether his views are in accord with or opposed to the program that has been outlined. Likewise, we are particularly anxious for further suggestions on any phase of this program or any ideas for its improvement from those who may, in general, favor its adoption.

Our sole interest is that we may discover or devise a program of Masonic Education that will really meet the needs of present day problems in our Craft. Personally, the writer's experience has compelled him to conclude that our means and methods and program of Masonic Education in the past have been too narrow and inadequate to meet the requirements of modern Masonry. Yet we do not feel sufficient confidence in our own proposals to give clear assurance that our plans and program will fully solve the problem. In fact, the one point on which we feel the greatest degree of certainty is the idea that the only way to work out a program that will completely solve the educational problems of modern Masonry is to find some way to stimulate suggestions and draw upon the experiences of interested members and well informed brethren from all parts of the Masonic domain. In other words, the only program that will surely solve our present day problems will be the one that is developed from the consensus of opinion of Masons everywhere who are interested in the cause of Masonic Education.

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